

Civil-Military Relations in Iraq (1921-2006): An Introductory Survey

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Introduction

The first unit of the Iraqi army was established on January 6, 1921 and was emblematically named *Fawj Musa al-Kadhim*, after the seventh Shi'i imam whose tomb is situated under the golden shrine in Baghdad.^[2] This is perhaps the first paradox pertaining to this entity, which has been an army by the Sunnis and for the Sunnis. To be sure, the number of Shi'i recruits increased in later decades, mainly because of the conscription, which was established by a law in 1934, drafting the Shi'a to the army in large numbers. But this increase in numbers did not cause an increase of Shi'i power, because the officer corps remained predominantly Sunni. This article surveys the historical military experience since the formation of modern Iraq and until the present time.

Prior to the British invasion 1914-1918, Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire, along with many other Arab areas in the region. The Ottomans divided the historic land of Iraq^[3] into three separate provinces, Musol in the north, Baghdad in the center and Basra in the south. The country was underdeveloped and plagued by highly corrupt governments. Following the declaration of WWI, the Ottoman central government issued its orders to all provinces to begin a sweeping campaign of monetary levy and to draft as many young men as possible to support the war effort. This was a long-awaited opportunity for the local administrators to enrich themselves at the expense of the general population and all in the name of war expenditure.

Great Britain invaded Iraq for the purpose of securing its interests in the region's oil and the protection of the route to India. The first British force landed at the Fao peninsula, southern Basra, on November 6, 1914—three days after the Ottoman Empire entered an alliance with Germany, and on the eve of the Ottoman declaration of war against Great Britain and France. On November 23, "Sir Percy Cox read in Arabic a proclamation which included the following statement of policy:

'The British Government has now occupied Basra, but though a state of war with the Ottoman Government still prevails, yet we have no enmity or ill-will against the population, to whom we hope to prove good friends and protectors. No remnant of Turkish administration now remains in this region. In place thereof the British flag has been

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established, under which you will enjoy the benefits of liberty and justice, both in regard to your religious and secular affairs.”^[4]

The relatively easy occupation of Basra gave the British an arrogant sense of confidence which caused them to dispatch a weak campaign against the Ottoman army up the Tigris River without the proper support. On April 29, 1916 the entire British army participating in that campaign, commanded by general Townshend, surrendered to the Ottomans in Kut after a brutal siege for five months, beginning in early December 1915. There were 13,309 soldiers and officers, including 2,870 British soldiers and officers, while the rest were Indians.^[5] However, British forces eventually accomplished the occupation of Iraq by 1918.

The reaction of Iraqis toward the British varied according to each group’s respective interests. The most favorable reaction came from the merchants, contractors and farm owners who made very handsome revenues from dealing with the British contrary to their dealings with the Ottomans. The British paid generously for the goods and services, while the Ottomans used to confiscate and conscript. Another group also was amenable to British occupation consisted of opportunist notables whose loyalty is given to the victors regardless of who that might be.^[6] The British also managed to purchase the loyalty of several tribal chiefs who promised to deliver the consent of their constituents. However, British efforts to secure the consent of religious authorities proved to be fruitless. British officials operated under the false assumption that centuries of Ottoman oppression were enough to make the Shi’i clergy ready to accept anyone who may deliver them from their ordeal. To the contrary, Shi’i scholars in Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad sided with the Sunni Ottomans against the non-Muslim invaders—many of them, like Muhammad Said al-Habboubi, actively participated in the fighting and mobilization of resistance forces, while more senior scholars, including Mahdi al-Khalisi and Mahdi al-Haydari, used their religious credentials to call for a binding *jihad* against the invaders. Their effort reached its climax in 1920, with the countrywide popular revolt, causing the British more than four hundred lives combined with a heavy price tag of 40 million pounds.

The revolt was instrumental in changing Britain’s plans for Iraq, from annexation, in the way India was dealt with, to the creation of an independent state with the preservation of British interests in the region as the first priority. On June 6, 1920, Sir Percy Cox, who was the British ambassador in Tehran, was summoned to London to consult with his government concerning the establishment of a provisional administration in Iraq. While en route to London, the 1920 revolt erupted and, by the time he arrived, British press and public opinion were mobilized against the involvement in Iraq, because of the loss in blood and treasure. The first order of business, according to Cox, was to suppress the revolt and then to either withdraw from Iraq and give up the mandate in order to cut the losses, or establish a local (Iraqi) government, which he favored.^[7]

On October 1, 1920, Cox arrived in Basra with a mandate to create an Iraqi national government. He was received by many people and a party was organized the next day to honor him and bid the outgoing political administrator, Arnold T. Wilson farewell. Several political hopefuls gave soothing speeches praising the “noble efforts” of Great Britain and accused the revolutionaries of shortsightedness. Of these it is worth quoting the speech of Muzahim al-Pachachi at some length:

“I feel sorry that the foolishness of some Arab individuals disturbed the nation of Britain and its honorable mission [i.e. the occupation of Iraq]. These acts were perpetrated because of some dreams impossible to come true, on the one hand, and for personal goals, on the other hands. The current movement—he means the Revolution—is not pure Arab. It is rather contaminated by foreign elements that regrettably succeeded to use the Arab fame and money and blood for their own benefit, and in order to weaken the position of Great Britain in other countries. Therefore, you must not be fooled by the appearances, which are deceptive most of the time—especially in the East. Don’t consider the present Revolution, which is carried out by some Bedouin tribes, a real

patriotic revolution aiming for independence; for, such an uprising cannot be considered representative of the feeling of the whole population.

Elite families in Baghdad can never sympathize with an uprising that destroyed its own country. These are the true feelings of the people who have important opinions, and they are eager to relate what they think and feel to those who call for the withdrawal of Britain from this country. They cannot realize that the withdrawal means nothing less than the violation of the rule of law and the destruction of the population and the ensuing spread of chaos all over the country, which might lead to an Asian war before which Britain cannot stay idle.”^[8]

Cox started his mission by appointing Ms. Gertrude Bell as his secretary—she was a well-educated civil employee who played an essential role in the creation of modern Iraq. He formed a cabinet with Abd al-Rahman al-Naqib as prime minister and twenty-one ministers. The nominee for prime minister insisted on a cabinet with no Shi'i ministers and eventually got his wish.^[9] Every minister was coupled with a British advisor who was the actual authority in the ministry's day-to-day affairs.

The next task was to recruit a head of state for the new country. The new king had to meet two conditions, being accepted by the Iraqis and willing to serve the interests of Great Britain in the country. It became clear from the first days of the search that no Iraqi personality would gain the confidence of Ms. Bell and her superiors. Some Iraqi officers who returned from abroad began a propaganda campaign for Faysal, the son of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, with whom they served in the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans. The idea of installing Faysal on the Iraqi throne was also supported by British officials, especially Ms. Bell. Finally, the British set their mind on Faysal to be the king, but they ensured through their own Iraqi agents that Faysal was chosen by the Iraqis themselves, by pretending to be against the choice. The assumption was that Iraqis would always act in contrary to the wish of the British, as Ms. Bell correctly stated.^[10]

Faysal had previously led an army from Hijaz to fight the Ottomans on behalf of Britain and France with the understanding that his father, Sharif Husayn of Mecca, would be rewarded with a kingdom in Arabia, Iraq and the Greater Syria. Feeling betrayed by his former allies, especially the British who declined to honor their pre-war agreement, without telling Faysal that they promised Syria to France, Faysal appointed himself king of Syria in March 1920. However, the San Remo Conference, held on April 19-26, assigned the mandate for Syria to France. It took the French a little effort to defeat Faysal's army in the Battle of Maysalun and dismantle the new kingdom in Damascus on July 24, 1920, five months after its establishment.^[11] Faysal lived in exile until he was contacted by the British to rule over Iraq.

Faysal was brought to Iraq on a British military boat in June 1921 and was coronated on August 23rd in the same year, following a national referendum. The people of each province were asked to sign a document authorizing a delegation to go to Baghdad and give their allegiance (*bay'a*) to Faysal; he, carried all the provinces except Kirkuk, were he was accepted by twenty documents and was rejected by twenty-one.^[12] The choice of the coronation date was made by Faysal himself, because it coincided with the 18 Dhu al-Hijja in the Islamic calendar when the Shi'a celebrate the Eid al-Ghadir; the day Prophet Muhammad appointed Ali for the caliphate.^[13]

Once again the Shi'a got their share in symbolism and the Sunnis carried the substance. Faysal began his term in office by appointing a legion of former Ottoman officers who were serving him in his conquest of Syria during World War I and in his short-lived kingship thereafter, all of whom were Sunnis. These officers, known as the Sharifians, continued to assume both the military and civilian ranks throughout the monarchy. To ensure the triumph of Faysal and his officers, the British manipulated the elections, supported the deportation of the Shi'a Ayatollahs who opposed the political process, and worst of all, they established a minority rule in Iraq. The latter put to rest any hopes for establishing a free and democratic society in the country for the next eight decades.

When Faisal was coronated in 1921, Iraqi defense was the responsibility of Great Britain according to the mandate granted to it by the League of Nations at San Remo in the previous year.[\[14\]](#) In spite of being selected by the top clergy and the Iraqi elite, the new king was not well connected to the population at large. Further, British continuous meddling in every detail undermined Faisal's prospects for legitimacy. A national army loyal to the monarchy was a way to enhance its legitimacy and ensure solidarity among the diverse constituents of Iraq's population. But this was easier to propose than to actually achieve. First, because the Ottoman officers were not a monolithic group. While some of them were monarchy loyalists (less than two hundred officers who joined Faisal in the Arab Revolt), the majority of returning officers espoused nationalist views and were offended by continued British occupation. Additionally, there were many officers who maintained the old loyalty to Turkey.[\[15\]](#) Second, the recruitment effort did not meet the hopes of the government in spite of the propaganda and appeals by the king and his close associates to tribal shaykhs and religious scholars for cooperation.

One of the main reasons for the shortage in recruits was the low pay of soldiers as compared with other professions. But this problem was solved quickly when the British decided in 1922 to raise the pay for the military, encouraging young men from all groups to join the army. This measure helped the number to rise from just over 3,000 in 1921 to 12,000 by 1932. However, other problems such as the sectarian mistrust of the state could not be solved. Tribal heads in the Shi'i areas did not want to contribute their young men, to strengthen the central government at the expense of their own territorial power. The same can be said about the way the Shi'i establishment felt, especially in light of the policies of Faisal and the British in giving the political and military positions to the Sunnis, thus violating his initial agreements with them.

Table 1: Iraq's Military Power Relative to Population[\[16\]](#)

Year	Real Numbers (1000s)	Population (1000s)	Ratio (per 1000)
1932	12	3,300	3.6
1963	20	3,600	5.5
1941	46	4,100	11.0
1943	30	4,400	6.8
1949	45	5,100	8.8
1963	50	7,500	6.6
1967	82	8,500	9.6
1972	102	10,000	10.0
1977	188	12,000	10.5
1980	242	13,200	18.3
1982	342	14,000	24.4
1984	607	14,600	41.6
1990	1,000	18,000	55.5

The founding of the Royal Military College, whose first graduates assumed their work in 1927 injected new blood in the Iraqi army. The new graduates were trained under the tutelage of British officers, unlike their seniors who came from the Ottoman Military Academy, which was dependent on the German military expertise. However, British policy makers placed a limit on the size of the Iraqi army, against the desires of King Faysal and his Sharifian officers, especially Ja'far al-Askari who occupied the position of defense minister from the beginning of Faysal's reign. As an attempt to break this restriction, the proponents of a larger military began advocating military conscription. This proposal, however, was wrapped in other claims, most appealing of which was the purported role of conscription in achieving national cohesion by making the army more inclusive of all components of the Iraqi society, especially the Shi'a majority whose representation was distressingly below their demographic weight.

It was naïve, if not disingenuous, to claim that the systemic problem of representation would be overcome by the establishment of conscription. The essence of the challenge was the distribution of power within the state at large, and the military was no exception. Sunni control of the top political and administrative positions created an aberrant environment with consequences adverse to the national cohesion. Similarly, the problem of representation within the army was essentially specific to the officer corps. As such, the establishment of conscription could not possibly have any effect on this challenge, because there could not be a conscription for officers. As stated previously, the Shi'a had no deficit in their representation outside the officer corps. Indeed, the anti-conscription movement created strange bedfellows when both the British and the Shi'a rallied their respective forces against the first bill following its introduction to the legislature in 1926 and ultimately managed to defeat it in 1929. However, the Bill was ultimately reintroduced and passed in 1933 when the national support for the army was at the highest level following the Assyrian massacre, as it will be discussed shortly.

The Iraqi state was dominated by a military mindset from the moment of its inception. King Faysal and his Sharifian loyalists—all former Ottoman officers—divided among themselves both civil and military positions in what could be described as a British-sponsored military coup against the leading social groups in Iraq. In the first year, the cabinet was formed by a civilian prime minister, Abd al-Rahman al-Naqib, with Sharifian officers holding the ministries of defense, justice and interior. In the following seven years, from November 1922 to April 1929, all prime ministers were Sharifian officers, with these ministries and others falling in the hands of Sharifian officers. This paradigm continued—a few exceptions notwithstanding—until the fall of the monarchy in 1958.

However, the first military interference in political affairs followed the transition of power from Faysal to his son, Ghazi. In the last year of his reign, Faysal deployed the army, under the command of General Bakr Sidqi, to end the Assyrian rebellion in the north. The Assyrians rose to power under British tutelage during WWI, fighting as a loyal auxiliary force on the British side and began to resettle in significant numbers in Iraq after the occupation. By 1932, the Assyrian Patriarch, Mar Sham'un, petitioned the League of Nations to grant his community an administrative autonomy in an area whose vast majority were Kurds. The British, having no further use for the Assyrians, opposed granting such autonomy because it would have undermined British vital interests in Iraq. The League of Nations rejected Mar Sham'un's demands, giving the Assyrians two choices: to take the promise by Iraq's government to settle them "under suitable conditions," or seek the Iraqi government's help for them to settle outside Iraq. Mar Sham'un refused to cooperate with the British and the Iraqi government to implement this decision, causing a showdown between the government and his community which ended in an Assyrian rebellion.

By 1933, the situation reached a point of no return and King Faysal sent General Sidqi to handle the escalating conflict by military means. Faysal's move was highly popular because of the previous atrocities carried out by the Assyrians when they served under the British. Mar Sham'un was detained in Baghdad in June 1933 while his loyalists crossed the Iraqi-Syrian border to ask for resettlement in Syria, but their request was denied by the French. As the Assyrians were

crossing the border back into Iraq, Iraqi soldiers were told that these ‘refugees’ were unarmed. But the Iraqi soldiers monitoring their return discovered that the French actually supplied them with weapons. As they began disarming them, suddenly shots were fired. The two sides engaged in a skirmish that left at the end of the day some 30 dead among the Iraqi soldiers and about 15 dead among the Assyrians. The army then executed a number of the Assyrians, and let about 500 cross the border.[\[17\]](#)

Having secured the permission to be “task-oriented,” and in the midst of a rising unpopularity suffered by the British and the anti-Assyrian sentiments, General Bakr Sidqi ran his troops through the Assyrian villages—there were over 40 villages under attack. When the dust settled, more than 300 Assyrian males were killed—said to be executed—and their villages were pillaged. This “accomplishment,” while posing as a problem for King Faysal, received the approval of his son, then Prince Ghazi, who soon assumed his father’s position. The new king gained valuable popularity for his support of the Army and General Sidqi, who also earned his share of recognition. But more importantly, the Assyrian affair and King Ghazi’s rise to the throne brought the army to the inner circle of politics.

The first outcome of this army popularity was the first coup d'état in the Arab world in the 20th century, predictably, executed by General Bakr Sidqi. The objectives of Sidqi's October 1936 coup were outlined in leaflets dropped from planes belonging to the Iraqi Royal Air Force and signed by General Bakr Sidqi himself:

“The army, which is composed of your sons, has lost patience with the present government, who have been concerned only with their own personal interests. Disregarding the public welfare. The army has therefore appealed to His Majesty the King to dismiss the present cabinet and replace it by another composed of sincere citizens under the leadership of Sayid Hikmat Sulaiman, who is held in greatest esteem and respect by the public. By this appeal we have no desire except to improve your condition and the country’s welfare, and we have therefore no doubt that you will cooperate with your brothers, the personnel of the army and their officers with all your power—as the power of the people is always supreme. To our brother officials we say: We are only your brothers and colleagues in the service of the state, which we all wish to be one having regard for the interests of the public. We expect you to do your duty by non-cooperation with the oppressive government, and by leaving your offices until a new cabinet, of which you will be proud, is formed. It is possible that the army may be compelled to take certain forcible measures, through which harm might unavoidably come to those who do not conform with this sincere appeal.”[\[18\]](#)

The coup, as can be seen from the text of the “appeal,” was not aimed at changing the regime as a whole. The demand was to remove the cabinet only and replace the people while keeping the institutions intact. But General Sidqi was not willing to accept just any change in accordance with the king’s preferences. He dictated his choice for prime minister, proposing Hikmat Sulaiman, a Turkoman politician who allied himself with Bakr Sidqi in opposing the Arab nationalist approach of the deposed government.

In spite of crafting the pamphlet as an address to the Iraqi people, the king who was addressed with courtesy, was the real target of the communiqué. This courtesy, however, was not meant to make the demands without teeth; “those who do not conform with” the demands were warned about the possibility of being subjected to “unavoidable harm.” However, the communiqué was so carefully crafted as not to stage unnecessary showdown with the king, who was, after all, essential in the rise of Sidqi, not to mention his popularity. The warning of harm was deliberately placed in the appeal to the officials in the government, which was separate from the passage addressing the king; hence, the king was given an ample opportunity to stay away from the struggle. Other than this, the pamphlet ensured the presence of all usual elements of this type of

rhetoric; namely, the power emanates from the people, the corruption of the deposed regime and the army's running out of patience.

The king complied and a government was formed by Hikmat Sulaiman. The new regime ruthlessly banished its enemies and pursued a new policy featuring a pro-Turkey approach, dealing fatal blows to the aspirations of the pan-Arab elements of the Iraqi elite. The new government also engaged in its own version of corruption, including overt personal indiscretions on the part of top officials, including Sidqi and Sulaiman, which gave their enemies ammunition to solicit popular wrath against them. The government of Hikmat Sulaiman ended shortly after the assassination of Bakr Sidqi and Muhammad Jawad, chief of the Iraqi Royal Air Force, in Musol, which led to the army's mutiny at the orders of General Amin al-'Umari, a pan-Arab who commanded the army in Musol.

The Bakr Sidqi coup and the toppling of the resultant government, both were plotted by the army, opened the gate for more subsequent meddling by the army in the country's politics. Most importantly, what started as a control of politics by retired officers became a system of power sharing between Sunni uniformed officers and the predominantly Sunni political elite. The coup briefly displaced the political elite that ruled since the founding of the state. The new government contained only a few Sunni Arabs and completely banished the advocates of a pan-Arabism. This arrangement resulted in a foreign policy friendly toward Turkey and Iran instead of the Arab world. The new government of Sulaiman quickly signed a treaty with Iran about the question of border between Iraq and Iran in the *Shatt al Arab*, the confluence of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Military interference in political life was increasingly established as a norm while the constitutional process was declining rapidly. This post-Sidqi era culminated in the next major attempt to topple the government, generally known as the Rashid Ali coup.

On April 1, 1941 the Iraqi cabinet under Prime Minister Taha al-Hashimi was forced to resign giving the opportunity to a nationalist group of officers, including Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh and Yunus al-Sab'awi, to form a "government of national defense" with Rashid Ali as prime minister and, ten days later, they replaced the regent to the throne, Abd al-Ilah, with a member of the Hashimite family who approved the resignation of al-Hashimi and formally asked Rashid Ali to form a cabinet. However, the new prime minister was caught between the stubbornness of the officers, who demanded complete British withdrawal, and the British who escalated the events until the showdown culminated in a British attack on the Iraqi army in Habbaniyya, at the same time the British Royal Air Force was destroying half of Iraq's forty planes.

The Rashid Ali government has aligned itself with Hitler's Germany according to the doctrine of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," but Hitler had a bigger fish to fry at that time. He was preparing to attack the Soviets and therefore, he had no troops to spare for saving the Iraqi government and preventing the British re-occupation of Iraq that was underway. By the end of May, the Rashid Ali government collapsed and the officers, along with Rashid Ali himself, fled to Iran leaving a vacuum of power that was filled by the mayor Baghdad, Arshad al-'Umari, who stepped in to form a council to conclude a peace agreement with the British. The deposed regent, Abd al-Ilah, returned with his loyalists.

After taking some time to consolidate their power, Abd al-Ilah and Prime Minister Nuri al-Sa'id began their pursuit of the enemies who participated in the Rashid Ali coup. First they eliminated the enemies who remained in Iraq by many executions and imprisonment. Then they sought the extradition of the leaders of the coup after trying them in absentia. The four officers were extradited by Turkey and Iran. In May 1942, three of them (Fahmi Sa'id, Mahmud Salman and Yunus al-Sab'awi) were executed two days after being retried and sentenced to death. Kamil Shibib was retried and executed in 1944 and the last of the leaders to be extradited was Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh, who was executed in October 1945. His body was kept hanging at the gate of the Ministry of Defense, an insult the army would never forget—as will be seen from their conduct in the 1958 coup.^[19] Rashid Ali remained in exile until the 1958 coup. Soon after his return, he

made another attempt to seize power, but his failed attempt led to a death sentence. He was pardoned by President Qasim and sent to exile where he remained until his death in 1965.

The Arab-Israeli war in 1948 was perhaps the beginning of the end for the monarchy in Iraq, as it was for many Arab regimes. The army, after an initial victory was forced to adhere to the UN imposed cease-fire, buying the Israelis enough time to regroup and rearm themselves. When fighting resumed, Arab armies were not able to accomplish any gains. Another cease-fire was concluded between Israel and the Iraqi-Jordanian side. The Hashimites, especially Abdullah, the Jordanian monarch, were accused of conspiring with Israel—not an outlandish charge given the history to the Hashimite family. A few bitter officers began plotting to take matters into their own hands and overthrow what they considered a puppet government.

During the early hours of the morning of July 14th, army units from the 19th and 20th brigades took advantage of an order to move to Lebanon to intervene in an internal conflict in that country. Instead, they attacked Baghdad and surrounded the residence of King Faysal II and the palace of PM Nuri al-Sa'id and captured the Baghdad Radio Station. The entire Royal Family was executed while Nuri al-Sa'id managed to escape, but he was found a couple of days later, disguised as a woman. The victors, having secured full control over the capital and, especially the Radio Station, announced themselves to the public in the following words:

“To the Noble People of Iraq:

After relying on God and with the support of the sincere sons of the people and the patriotic armed forces, we have taken the initiative to liberate the beloved homeland the clutches of the corrupt clique which was installed by the colonizers to rule over the people and risk its fortunes for their own interest and for personal gains.

Dear Brethren: the army is from you and for you, having done what you want and removed the misbehaving clique, that disregarded the people's rights, only expects your support. Let it be known that victory cannot be complete without being secured and protected from the conspiracies of the colonizer and its tails. Hence, we call upon you to inform the authorities about any corrupt or abusive person and any traitor in order to eliminate him, and we ask you to be one hand in purging those individuals and eliminating their evil.

Dear Citizens: as we value your energetic spirit of patriotism and good deeds, we ask you to keep calm and tranquility and order, unity and cooperation through continued work toward the good of the homeland...”[\[20\]](#)

Abd al-Karim Qasim emerged as the hero of the “revolution” and a power struggle among the officers who plotted and executed the coup began almost immediately. Abd al-Salam Arif, who was closely involved in the planning and execution of the coup, was sidelined. The main difference between Arif and Qasim was about Arif's demand that Iraq immediately joins the United Arab Republic (Egypt and Syria). Qasim was not willing to deliver Iraq to Gamal Abd al-Nasir. Arif began to “tour the cities of Iraq, giving unrehearsed speeches at each stop—speeches that brought criticism more than support.”[\[21\]](#) In his speaking tour, Arif was trying to sell his proposal to attach Iraq to the United Arab Republic, praising Nasir in the midst of a growing countrywide support for Qasim. In a swift act of retaliation, Qasim relieved Arif from the post of deputy commander of the armed forces and, shortly thereafter, from his position as the minister of interior and remove him from the scene by appointing him ambassador to Germany. Arif refused the new post, but was persuaded to accept it. He traveled for a short time and returned without permission. Once in Iraq, he was tried for attempting a coup against Qasim and sentenced to death, but Qasim pardoned him.

The military, which remained in control of most positions in the government, was divided in a three-way order. There were officers loyal to Qasim, others loyal to Arif and a third group of officers not associated with either leader, but had played important roles in the coup. Muhammad Hussein al-Habib, a member of the third group, describes the bitterness of his comrades as follows:

"We used to go to the Ministry of Defense sometimes, some brethren and I, to see and hear what was going on. We saw strange faces occupying major positions in the ministry; they had nothing to do with the Revolution. Military Intelligence, which is the most important offices in the ministry, was commanded by an officer remote from the Revolution, while a senior revolutionary from the days leading to 14 July [1958]—Lt. Colonel Rif'at al-Haj Sirry—was stuck in the position of the deputy. He was sitting in his office in pain not knowing what to do with these strange faced around him... [Everywhere in the ministry] we saw faces remote from the Revolution, but they all spoke in the name of the Revolution; each carried his pistol on his side appearing to the observer as someone without whom no revolution would take place and no regime would change. We saw all this while pain as well as fear for the future of the Revolution filled our hearts."[\[22\]](#)

The Qasim era was praised and condemned by numerous voices, each depending on their respective agenda, but the best way to describe him was to quote one of his enemies, Talib Shibib, who participated in the coup against Qasim and was one of the leaders of the following regime. He says the following:

Qasim was a patriot and a defender of the interests of poor people. His projects to benefit them were not propaganda or deception. Indeed, he believed in these projects and achieved them with zeal. But he was a dictator. The country under his rule remained under a transitional constitution. He approached politics as a professional military man, damaging his relation with all political parties...[but] even though he was the lone ruler of Iraq, he did not crave for a farm or a piece of land, while all Iraqi rulers before and after him gained, usurped and embezzled public funds.[\[23\]](#)

On February 8, 1963 Arif and a group of nationalist and Ba'athist officers and civilians overthrew the government of Qasim. The planning and execution were similar to that of 1958. The plotters captured the Baghdad Radio and TV Station, making it their headquarters. They surrounded Qassim and a few of his loyal followers in the Ministry of Defense and after a short battle, Qasim agreed to surrender on the condition that he would have a fair trial. Upon his arrival in the Baghdad Radio and TV Station he had an exchange of accusations for a few minutes with the leaders of the coup followed by his execution. His body was shown on TV to ensure that his supporters realized the end of his era.

For all his rhetoric about the unity with the United Arab Republic after 1958, the new president, Abd al-Salam Arif, showed no sincere interest in uniting Iraq with anyone. The new government was dominated by military officers and the line between what is civil and what is military was blurred. The coup government consolidated some units of gunmen—formed to carry out assassinations and other criminal tasks immediately prior to the coup—into a militia known as *al-haras al-qawmi* (The National Guard). The National Guard was initially a subsidiary of the Ba'ath Party, but, later on, every Ba'athist became by definition a member in the National Guard.[\[24\]](#) This militia began by eliminating the enemies of the regime and the former supporters of Qasim, especially the Communists who were imprisoned and tortured. Then, the unchecked power of the Guard caused its members to abuse their power and devote their positions for personal benefits, committing some of the worst crimes (murders, rape and the like). Finally, the guard was used to intimidate some members of the cabinet on behalf of the leadership of the Guard. As they have no more tasks to perform, the Guard became a burden on the government. Talib Shibib, then a member of the Revolutionary Command Council, recalls being stopped by the National Guard on his way from a government meeting. They claimed that he was stopped because there was a

security alert in the country, issued by the leadership. He called the deputy commander of the Guard, Nijad al-Safi, to inquire about this “security alert.” Al-Safi replied, “They have nothing to do, so we issued a security alert to keep them busy.”^[25]

The Guard’s behavior and Arif’s reluctance to join Egypt (the United Arab Republic was dissolved in 1961) led to the breakdown of the Ba’ath-Arif alliance. Arif, with the help of several key officers loyal to him, planned a government takeover and executed the plan without having to kill anyone. The government he formed on November 18, 1963 was essentially a military government. From that point on, Arif ruled Iraq with a close circle of people who displayed loyalty to him personally. He ended the Ba’ath government and dismantled the National Guard. Those retained from the early days of the coup, mainly Ba’athists, were eliminated by dismissal or marginalization. Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, a Ba’athist officer, was pushed aside in 1964 when Arif abolished the post of vice-president which al-Bakr held. It was Arif who institutionalized the official anti-Shi’a rhetoric. He referred to the Shi’a with the historically negative epithet (*rawafidh*) and publicly denouncing the Shi’a in the south as “*shu’ubiyya* (a term from the Abbasid era referring to non-Arab subjects who were accused of disloyalty to the state). It was in his time when the ban on Shi’i religious rituals occurred for the first time in the 20th century.

Arif died in a helicopter crash on April 13, 1966 on his way to Basra during one of his speaking tours. His death, along with two ministers and other officials, was first thought to be planned, but subsequent investigations found no evidence of a planned assassination. Four days later an election was staged with two candidates on the menu, Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz and Abd al-Rahman Arif. The latter, who was the minister of defense and a brother of the dead president, won the presidency after the withdrawal of his opponent. Two years later, the weak President Arif was toppled by the Ba’athist coup on July 17, 1968. Unlike previous coups, this one was executed without blood, and the president was given a safe passage to exile.

The Ba’ath party, having learned a hard lesson from the power-sharing experience in 1963, was determined to gain exclusive control over the government in as short a time as possible. The coup was the result of collaboration by many nationalist elements as well as ambitious military officers.

On July 30, 1968, two weeks after the coup, the Ba’ath conducted a blatant purge removing the supporters of two officers, Abd al-Razzaq al-Nayif and Ibrahim al-Dawoud, who played a major role in executing the coup, but were not part of the Ba’ath inner circle. This move cleared the way for al-Bakr-Saddam faction to rule Iraq with minimal opposition. For the next five years (1968-1973) the elimination of political enemies, and even potential enemies, became the norm. The Ba’ath party, having eliminated others from the political scene, began an era of internal power struggle. A clique from Tikrit, hometown of al-Bakr and Saddam, began a quest to consolidate their power at the expense of the party’s rank and file from other cities.^[26] After 1975, Saddam Hussein became the de facto ruler of Iraq with the help of the elaborate network of security forces established under his personal supervision and consisting exclusively of his own loyalists. From that point forward, the fate of Iraq was sealed. In the words of one author:

“The arrival of Saddam Hussein to power, by military means, signaled the country’s entry into a new era of authoritarian violence. In [this era,] violence acquired an all-inclusive nature while the administration of society through the military and security police became the conventional way of life; even war came to be the part that completes the picture of daily life.”^[27]

On July 17, 1979, Iraqi President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr used his annual address commemorating the anniversary of the coup to announce his resignation citing health problems, leaving the country “in the capable hands of Saddam Hussein.” Saddam began his rule by purging the leadership of the party and many high-ranking officials including some ministers. He then

rearranged the leadership of the army, reserving the ministry of defense to his cousin, Adnan Kharallah Tilfah. Many officers were either eliminated or forced into early retirement.

The invasion of Iran in 1980 inaugurated an era of military expansion and careful inclusiveness. The protracted war from 1980-1988 demanded the multiplication of army divisions, which meant more recruitment from Shi'i cities, including an obvious change in the pattern of admission to the military academy, which used to draw its recruits almost exclusively from the Sunni-Arab population. The special demands imposed by the war forced the regime to expand the Republican Guard by including officers and soldiers whose loyalty was not fully guaranteed. Consequently, the Republican Guard lost its special position and Guard units were prohibited from entering Baghdad. A new, more loyal, army was formed from select cities whose Sunni-Arab populations were known for steadfast support for the regime. The new army became generally known as the Special Republican Guard. This military division was supervised by Saddam Hussein's second son, Qusay. It included four infantry brigades strengthened by armor, artillery and air defense capabilities. It includes some 26,000 men whose personal and family background was meticulously checked.

In addition to the regular army, which expanded from 242,000 men in 1980 to 607,000 men in 1984 ultimately 1,000,000 men in 1990 during the occupation of Kuwait. In addition to this giant army, considering Iraq's demographic and political circumstances, there was another army was drafted from a pool of Ba'athist officials designated for tasks similar to those performed by the officers in the regular army, and other able-bodied men who were out of the army, for various reasons, to perform the tasks of the soldiers. This organization was called "the Popular Army." The main tasks for the Popular Army were related to filling the areas behind the regular forces and, in some instances, participating in actual combat—often with catastrophic results. However, the Popular Army came as a deliberate attempt to militarize the population at large. The Popular Army was also a way to keep idle young men off the streets. Just after finishing the ninth grade I recall being ordered to join a training camp during the summer session to train on the use of infantry weapons. After the boot camp period my unit, formed of students and teachers, was sent to the Iraqi-Saudi border to spend the rest of our summer vacation in border checkpoints. We were not old enough to handle live ammunition, but still had to stand guard with unloaded Kalashnikovs.

In 1985, with the war taking a bad turn for the Iraqis, college students were ordered to report to training camps during the summer break. Failing to do so meant expulsion from college and ultimately ending up in the army for real combat. Tens of thousands reported to a three-month training period uncertain about the plan once training was over.[\[28\]](#) While visiting one of the training facilities, Saddam Hussein made the announcement that, from that year onward, the best three students in each academic department will serve only forty-five days in the military and then will be accepted automatically to graduate programs.[\[29\]](#) It so happened that the first year to apply the law, Saddam's own son, Qusay, graduated with the best GPA among all students in the University of Baghdad.

The Iraq-Iran war ended on August 8, 1988 in the midst of many hopes that Iraq was going to enjoy a lasting peace, having learned a hard lesson from the prolonged war. But two years later, on August 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait and defied all the calls to withdraw his forces. "The mother of all battles," as he called it ended in a catastrophic defeat for the Iraqi military. Iraq officers and soldiers came from Kuwait on foot and ended up trading their weapons with the locals in the south for some bread and tomatoes. In essence, Iraq had no government after January 17, 1991 and no army, other than the Republican Guard, after February 28th. This opportunity encouraged a spontaneous uprising in the south and the north starting March 1st, and a week later thirteen of Iraq's fourteen provinces fell into the hands of local revolutionaries.

The March 1991 uprising inaugurated a new chapter of civil-military relations in Iraq. For the first time since its establishment, the Iraqi army swept through all thirteen provinces, where the uprising took place, conducting comprehensive combat operations. Cities like Najaf and Karbala were reduced to rubble and thousands of civilians were killed or executed in the first few days. Shortly thereafter, tens of thousands were rounded up and taken to unknown locations, never to be seen again—many of them were located in mass graves after the fall of Saddam Hussein's government in 2003.[\[30\]](#)

The 1990s, with the economic sanctions taking a stifling toll on the Iraqi society at large, the army was reduced both in numbers and the scope of activity. With the destruction of Iraq's long-range missiles and other military capabilities, Saddam's regional ambitions were no longer existent. By 1994, two thirds of Iraqi troops were discharged, leaving 382,500 soldiers whose sole purpose was to protect the government against any uprising similar to the one in 1991. To that end, the regime continued to create loyal armies with specific tasks aimed at intimidating the people and maintaining a strangling hold on the country. *Fida'iyu Saddam*, an army of Iraqi youth formed in 1995 by Saddam's son (Uday) is one example of such auxiliary forces. The group was used by Uday Saddam Hussein to intimidate his enemies and also to provide cover for his smuggling operations. In 1998, a branch of this organization was founded to train minors, ages between 10 and 15 years, and was called *Ashbal Saddam*.[\[31\]](#) The organization remained until the fall of Saddam's government in 2003 when the members of *Fida'iyu Saddam* and *Ashbal Saddam* simply melted away in the civilian crowd; some of them joined the new political parties of their respective geographical areas.

After the occupation of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, the fate of the Iraqi army was one of the difficult questions before the American administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority, L. Paul Bremer. Using his authority as the sole decision maker in Iraq, Bremer simply dissolved the military and the police. The mixed results of this decision merit a separate study, but the formation of a new army and its aftermath will make the conclusion of this article.

The new Iraqi army started as a predominantly Shi'i force because of the boycott by the Sunnis. However, with the recent green light given to them from Sunni leaders, Sunnis, especially the officers, began joining the army in considerable numbers. Since it takes time to prepare officers, the problem that plagued the army throughout the 20th century seems to continue with the new era; namely, the dominance of Sunni officers over an army of predominantly Shi'i soldiers. There seems to be no easy solution to this problem, but hard decisions have to be made if Iraq is to avoid the consequences of this uneven distribution.

The current Iraqi army consists of infantry brigades, the National Guard (initially called the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps), rapid intervention forces and Iraqi Special Forces. It is hard to determine the level of readiness of such forces, but the reports of American officials close to the assessment indicate that none of the units can operate on its own at a time when Iraqi officials and officers complain about lack of weapons and equipment which leaves the Iraqi army less equipped than the insurgents and perhaps less equipped than the many militias as well. As award-winning reporter, Anthony Shadid, and Steve Fainaru observed:

The [soldiers] spoke of the insurgents with a hint of awe, saying the fighters were willing to die and outgunned them with rocket-propelled grenades and, more fearsome, car bombs. [Cpl. Ahmed] Zwayid, a father of three, looked in disgust at his own AK-47 assault rifle, with a green shoelace for a strap.

"We fire 10 bullets and it falls apart," he said. Zwayid patted a heavy machine gun mounted in the bed of the Humvee. "This jams," he said. "Are these the weapons worthy of a soldier?" He and others said it was a sign of the Americans' lack of confidence in them.

"We trust the Americans. We go everywhere with them, we do what they ask," he said. "But they don't trust us."[\[32\]](#)

On their part, American trainers look at their Iraqi trainees with unusual contempt. Shadid and Fainaru describe the other side of the relationship as follows:

"We can't tell these guys about a lot of this stuff, because we're not really sure who's good and who isn't," said Rick McGovern, a tough-talking 37-year-old platoon sergeant from Hershey, Pa., who heads the military training for Charlie Company...

"We like to refer to the Iraqi army as preschoolers with guns," he said.[\[33\]](#)

Undeterred by the condescension of their American trainers and the indifference of their Iraqi leaders thousands of Iraqis line up weekly by recruitment offices in many parts of the country. But the Iraqi ministry of defense has been marred by corruption and sectarian politics. After the transfer of power on June 28, 2004, the ministry of defense was assigned to Hazim al-Sha'lan, a controversial personality who came to the position because of his tribal connections and anti-Iranian rhetoric. After leaving office, al-Sha'lan and twenty-six others were accused of embezzling more than one billion dollars in defense procurement funds.[\[34\]](#) In the departing government of PM Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, the ministry was assigned to Sa'adun al-Dulaimi as a gesture to the Sunni Arabs who boycotted the January 30, 2005 elections and to balance the distribution of the so-called sovereign ministries, such as the ministry of interior and the foreign ministry, which went to a Shi'i and a Kurd respectively. It is very likely that the new minister of defense will be determined in a similar agreement in the weeks to come.

On the positive side, the Iraqi army enjoys the highest popularity in decades, in most provinces. When the commander of The Wolf Brigade walked in the al-Sha'ab Stadium to attend a soccer game, he received a spontaneous standing ovation not received previously by any general. Also, "in a poll conducted for the occupation authority," the Iraqi army received 61 percent positive rating, while the poll showed a negative rating for the U.S. and allied forces was at 82 percent.[\[35\]](#) There are good reasons for this popularity. For most Iraqis, the new army is no longer the oppressive instrument for the regime. Also, the Iraqi army is their hope to see an Iraq free of foreign troops. While Iraqis disagree on the need for keeping foreign troops for the time being, they are almost unanimous in their aspirations to see them leave as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Iraqi civil-military relations suffered from three problems. First, the dominance of Iraq's Sunni minority through the group's almost exclusive access to membership in the officer corps. This was facilitated by the exclusion of Shi'a during the Ottoman period, a policy that was continued by the British and the Iraqi governments since the independence. In spite of the desire to correct this problem in the current military structure, it is not easy to undo the effects of past aggressive exclusion of the Shi'a. The making of Iraq's new army inevitably necessitated the recruitment of officers from the dissolved military, whose vast majority are Sunnis. It will take a few years to prepare enough Shi'i officers to offset this disproportion and any equal Shi'i presence in the high-ranking officer corps will not be seen for decade or two from now.

The second problem pertains to the continuous military involvement in politics. Iraq had a constitutional system in the time leading to independence in 1932 and throughout the monarchy. It was the military encroachment on the political realm that breached this constitutional framework and eventually abolished it in 1958. Iraq had no permanent constitution between 1958 and 2005. The greatest danger that may confront the nascent constitutional system in Iraq, currently underway, is a military coup before constitutional democracy takes root in the political culture. After all, the current government and the coming ones will suffer from the same legitimacy deficit,

being formed under the tutelage of an occupying power. The rising of army popularity, while desired to a certain point, can be a hostile competitor, perhaps a threat, to civilian leadership. Unless a mechanism against such threat is put in place, it is hard to tell how long democracy in Iraq may endure.

The third problem is perhaps the reverse side of the previous one; namely, the encroachment of sectarian wrangling among civilian politicians on the identity and affiliation of the military. The Sunni-Shi'i competition over who controls the ministry of defense seems to indicate that both sides have an agenda to employ the military for the advancement of their respective objectives. If this happens, the military will suffer from a disabling struggle, which can cause demoralization or perhaps mutiny, depending on the balance of power between the civilian leadership and the military command. This is a harder problem than the previous one, because the constitutional civilian control over the military makes impossible the placement of a mechanism to prevent civilian meddling in military affairs.

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References

1. Abbas Kadhim is a member of the NPS faculty. The views expressed in the article are solely the responsibility of the author, and they do not represent the official view of the U.S. Navy, Department of Defense, or U.S. government. This article is extracted from a larger study currently underway.
2. King Faysal suggested that this unit be named after Ms. Gertrude Bell, but Ja'far al-Askari suggested the name of Musa al-Kadhim.
3. The claims by many contemporary scholars of the Middle East that Iraq did not exist as one unit before the British combined the three Ottoman provinces are not historically accurate. Muslim historians and geographers since the 10th century C.E. spoke of Iraq as the land including Basra, Baghdad, and Musol. However, the Ottomans, and the British after them, did expand the northern region of Musol to include areas previously not considered as part of Iraq.
4. Arnold T. Wilson, *Loyalties: Mesopotamia 1914-1917*, 10-11.
5. *Ibid.*, 99. According to Wilson, there were 277 British officers, 204 Indian officers, 2,592 British rank and file, 6,988 Indian rank and file and 3,248 non-combatant Indians. During the siege 1,025 were killed, 721 had died of disease, 2,500 had been wounded and 72 went missing.
6. If history occasionally repeats itself, then today's Iraq is one of such occasions. The progeny of early 20th century Iraqis are well represented in the current government, having attained their status by similar means.
7. Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima'iyya min Tarikh al-Iraq al-Hadith* (henceforth, *Lamahat*) 6, 9-10.
8. *Ibid.*, 11-12.

9. *Ibid.*, 30.

10. Burgoyne, *Gertrude Bell* 2, 209.

11. The French general, Gouraud, illustrated the mindset of his campaign as he immediately went to the tomb of Salahiddin (Saladdin), kicked it, and said: "We are back Saladdin." For details on the Battle of Maysalun, see Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat* 6, *Op.Cit.*, 161-63.

12. Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat* 6, *Ibid.*, 115-16. Al-Wardi reports that the support for Faysal came from Arbil region, which was part of Kirkuk at the time, while the rejection came from the city Kirkuk. This might be due to the Turkoman influence in Kirkuk, who saw Faysal as an enemy of the Ottoman Empire.

13. This gesture coincided with a strange moment when the British band, knowing no Iraqi national anthem, played the British one: "God save the King."

14. Iraq was entrusted to Britain as a mandate at the San Remo Conference in 1920.

15. One of those officers was Tawfiq al-Khalidi. Sir Percy Cox nominated him for the ministry of interior, but King Faysal rejected this nomination, accusing al-Khalidi of loyalty to the Turks and so did Ja'far al-Askari, who told Ms. Bell that appointing al-Khalidi would be detrimental to everyone's interests; Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat* 6, *Op. Cit.*, 123-24.

16. For more information about the composition and personnel numbers in the Iraqi military, see Mohammad A. Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1982) and Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements in Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

17. Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 58.

18. Quoted by Mohammad Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics*, 122.

19. According to Arif Abd al-Razzaq, some officers were saluting al-Sabbagh's body which was left hanging at the gate of the Ministry of Defense for a whole day (Interview on al-Jazeera on September 3, 2001).

20. Muhammad H. al-Habib, *Haqa'iq 'an Thawrat 14 Tammouz fi al-'Iraq* (*Facts pertaining to the July 14 [1958] Revolution in Iraq*), 100-101.

21. *Ibid.*, 105.

22. *Ibid.*, 104.

23. Talib Shibib, *'Iraq 8 Shabat* (The Iraq of 8 February [1963]), 111-13. Of course, Shibib conveniently neglected to mention that he participated in two coups and served in the resulting governments, but neither one gave Iraq a permanent constitution. Indeed, in his own words, they did not even live up to the integrity of Qasim.

24. For the structure and nature of the tasks given to this vicious organization, see *Ibid.*, 165.

25. *Ibid.*, 169.

26. On the power struggle within the Ba'ath Party, see the testimony of Salah 'Umar al-'Ali to al-Jazeera (June 15 and 29, 2003).

27. Salam Abboud, *Thaqafat al-'Unf fi al-Iraq (The Culture of Violence in Iraq)*, 173.

28. In spite of the challenges of the war from 1980 to 1988, the Iraqi government never exploited the student population for the war. Being a student was about the only way for able-bodied men to avoid the military.

29. The normal military service for college graduates was a mandatory two-year term. As for graduate school, admission was based on the need for degree holders the state anticipates having according to its five -year plan.

30. For the events of April 1991 in Najaf, for example, see Abbas Kadhim, "[Painful Archeology: Excavating Saddam's Mass Graves](#)," *Strategic Insights*, Volume V, Issue 3 (March 2006).

31. *Fida'iyyoun* is Arabic for "self-sacrificers" and *Ashbal* literally means cubs and it also refers to boys under 15 years old.

32. Anthony Shadid and Steve Fainaru, "[Building Iraq's Army: Mission Improbable](#)," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2005.

33. [*Ibid.*](#)

34. See [BBC News Arabic.com](#).

35. Thomas E. Ricks, "[80% in Iraq Distrust Occupation Authority](#)," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2004. This poll was taken days before the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal came to light.